

Broken Silence: A review of Tahirih Theology: Female Cosmic Christ Spirit of the Age Concealed No Longer By Starr Saffa, Zeus Publications (Gold Coast: 2005). ISBN: 1-9210-0551-3

Everybody became my friend according to their own inclination

None searched for my secrets from within me - Rumi (Masnavi, Book I, prologue)

هر که از ظن خود شد یار من

نجست از درون اسرار من

Never was a line of poetic verse more appropriately put to describe the generally abysmal state by which one of Iran's greatest revolutionary mystic poets, Babi leaders, feminists, not mention a great ancestor of mine, has been continually misrepresented and misappropriated by those with their own peculiarly idiosyncratic interests and sectarian agendas. To the Baha'is, Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn (d. 1852) has been made the docile proto-Baha'i saint where both her antinomian and solidly Babi and pro-Subh-i-Azal (d. 1912) credentials have been conveniently brushed under the carpet and re-Imagined to fit their own calculated, *ahistorical* perspectives. Of course this has been part and parcel of their project of fictional recreation of early Babi history *tout court*, projecting their own sectarian fantasies on to the past (i.e. *conflation*), so Tahirih is not the only victim here. The whole early Babi pantheon remains in the same position.

To the Iranian Left, she has been made the patron saint of the women's suffragette movement and a proto-Marxist of nineteenth century Iran while her Babi and extreme heterodox Shi'ite mystical leanings have been totally forgotten altogether because the Left in Iran, to its continual myopic foolishness, has always viewed such things with a great deal of embarrassment. It is not necessary to even broach the *ahistorical* propaganda within the hagiographical pseudo-narratives of a Nabil Zarandi (d. 1893?) or a Martha Root (d. 1939) to discover the deliberate and systematic obfuscations made of her narrative and *situs* by the Baha'is. One only needs to point out the earliest Babi histories themselves such as Hajji Mirza Jani's (d. 1852) **Book of the Point of Kashan** (*kitab nuqtat'ul-kaf*), her own surviving letters and treatises, the poetry, and especially the reminiscences of people who actually knew her intimately, such as Shah Sultan Jahan Izziyyeh Khanum Nuri (d. 1903?), to realize the extent to which the Baha'is have deliberately obscured her role and re-*Imagined* her life and career to cater to their own shallow, whimsical and conceited sectarian notions of who she ought

to be. The Iranian Left, however, is perhaps even more guilty than the Bahá'ís here, for at least unlike these religionists they have possessed the intellectual tools, the subtlety, the sophistication, not to mention the wherewithal, to have not allowed the multifaceted aspects of her complex character and historical situation to be thoroughly obscured as it has. Everybody wishes to own and thereby attribute their own quirks and nonsense upon Qurrat'ul-'Ayn. But none have as yet been prepared to dispassionately investigate and portray the truth about her life and career in detail showing who and what she really was. I have begun the task of thorough research myself over the past several years (reading and locating virtually everything in existence by or relating to her), as did Denis Maceoin before he abandoned the project. But a great deal remains to be done before anything resembling a publication is ready to be put before a reputable publisher to thereby allow her to be snatched back to freedom from the sullied hands of sectarian religionists and leftwing ideologues.

I do, however, wish to mention the following aside as an example of the absolutely ridiculous misappropriation that the memory of Táhirih has been subjected to of late. I will never forget how in the mid '90s the once Saddam Hussein backed and currently Israeli-Saudi backed MKO/MEK organization continually compared their leader and self-styled provisional president of the Democratic Islamic Republic of Iran, Maryam Abrishamchi Rajavi, to Táhirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn. To his total discredit, the LA based Iranian pop singer Aref blatantly expressed this asinine stupidity on stage once at the so called "unity concert" in Paris (summer 1994) and thereafter it was repeated parrot fashion again and again by the editors of the now defunct Mojahed newspaper. I was even more appalled then, as I am now, that not a single academic or learned pundit called the MKO on this simply scandalous comparison. Where were the Juan Coles or Farzaneh Milanis to shut these political cultists up? Silent, as usual, comfortably napping on their armchairs in the Ivory Tower. I am sorry but Mrs. Rajavi couldn't carry Táhirih Qurrat'ul-Ayn's jockstraps, let alone to be compared to this great visionary Babi. Moreover Aref wouldn't know Táhirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn from his backside let alone to deign compare her to a convicted, morally bankrupt leader of a Stalinist-Iranian style-Khmer Rouge terrorist organization such as Maryam Rajavi and her MKO. On the other hand, among the Iranian leftwing *literati* of the early twentieth century one can forgive a Forugh Farrokhzad (d. 1967) and her intellectual *salon* for not going further into the persona of Táhirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn in their writings. But at least Forugh had the honesty to acknowledge the debt she owed to Táhirih personally and the influence that this Hourí of

Badasht exerted on her own poetry without however deigning to *Imagine* a Tahirih of her own making like the others. That said I am not here specifically to air detailed gripes at the Baha'is or the Iranian Left. All of that will appear in the future where I plan to thoroughly dismantle the fictions these two groups have been guilty of foisting for over a century and a half against the memory of this great Babi martyr and Letter of the Living. I am here instead, by way of the responsibility I feel I owe the legacy of this great woman and ancestor of mine, and to speak about a monster I feel I am responsible for creating. This review, therefore, is my *mea culpa* to Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn and to set the record straight for the public at large as to where I stand on Ms Saffa's book.

I will begin by saying that **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** has disappointed me tremendously because it is about anything but **Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn**. It is mainly a work of very superficial New Age fluff that has as much to do with Qurrat'ul-'Ayn as sulphurous fumes have to lightning. Let's get this straight from the get-go: **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** is about Ms Starr Saffa and her own ideas. It is not - repeat NOT! - about Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn. It is not even a panegyric set to prose regarding Qurrat'ul-'Ayn, which would've been fine in and of itself. Even the most sophisticated of postmodernist intellectual contortions cannot make this out to be a work about Tahirih. What it is, is an assembly of hodge-podge, half digested ideas with Tahirih as an afterthought. **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** is not an academic or scholarly work. It is not particularly well researched and many of its positions are not well thought out by the author. It is not even a work that fits the genre of high grade contemporary occult and esoteric literature. It is primarily an autobiography of the author's life experiences thus far with the name and some very surface features regarding the life and ideas of Qurrat'ul-'Ayn thrown in there for general effect whilst premised on some of the more goofier popular New Ageisms floating around. I also wish to point out that none of the reviewers of **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** so far, from Canadian based fantasy writer Michael McKenney to Georgia Efford, are remotely qualified to be discussing this book even approaching the borders of anything resembling the informed. They certainly are not contributing a diddle to the advancement of knowledge with their sugar-coated reviews. Neither knows Persian or Arabic or has ever been exposed to the corpus of Babi writings, or has extensively reviewed the critical secondary literature in European languages, that would've helped them better situate their overall appraisal of what is going on in Ms Saffa's text. In short, where the proper

contextualization of this book is concerned, neither knows a fig as to what they are talking about.

Before launching into my thematic critique, I wish to also to make a confession in that I was very much responsible for encouraging Ms. Saffa to write and publish a work in the first place. I say "*a*" work and not "*the*" work because the initial impetus of what she was going to be writing about was to be mainly a work of free gnostic oriented inspiration very much like some of my own creative, esoteric inspired prose and verse. I put a challenge to her. Be that as it may, there is not an iota of that anywhere in **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** so I don't believe she met it remotely, even half way. The question I have kept asking myself for these months privately after **TAHIRIH THEALOGY** first came out was what was the point of this exercise, then? Knowing Ms Saffa personally before parting ways, I definitively know the answer to that question but do not wish to articulate it publicly in any extensive detail. I will say this, though, I am simply appalled by the misguided zealotry which everything Ms Saffa is doing in the name of Tahirih has taken of late. This was not what we initially envisaged, or at least I envisaged. My vision has been around the concept of a mystery school and esoteric/occult initiation into higher truth, i.e. the alchemical Great Work. She seems to me to have transferred and therefore sublimated wholesale the warped attitudes of her exoteric Baha'i missionary zeal of yore into this whatever it is she has spawned and which this first book is intended to spearhead. To me, she has become fixated on the allure of the shadow rather than the light, yet she knows it not. There is almost a kind of narrow-minded, proselytizing fundamentalism and dogmatism involved in her activities since this book came out that is - no matter how much I have pleaded with her to abandon - responsible for pushing me away from her, her activities and her ideas for good. Starr Saffa, I am afraid to say, has turned into quite the Tahirih-thumping fanatic, but with the Tahirih being portrayed here completely and categorically a figment of her own imagination and not remotely any Tahirih of history, or, for that matter, any Tahirih of high gnostic truth. A pseudo-Tahirih of garbled New Ageism, most definitely, but not my great ancestor Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn or what she represented, truly.

I will not be broaching in this review the numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes replete throughout the book, nor that Saffa gets the numerical value of the letter *Tau* in Greek (the Hebrew *Tav*) wrong (which is 400), or that the so called Tahirih symbol is of her own contriving and not particularly profound, at least to me. It was the responsibility

of her copy editors and proof readers at Zeus Publications to point these things out, and they also have failed in their task. Nor will I ask the pertinent question as to why a full chapter of the book is authored by someone else. Nor am I going to contend with the concept "Thealogy," which Saffa doesn't even critically examine or elaborate much on in any case. These are irrelevant side-issues. I am interested in a thematic critique of the core idea behind the book. I will say this, however, a book that contends to pontificate upon such an important figure such as Tahirih should at least utilize source texts, even those translated by others. One prayer translated by Juan Cole doesn't count. It is a doxological prayer that is not representative of her overall and complete views. Failing the source texts, it should demonstrate a thorough and analytical mastery of the secondary source material. Saffa has failed on both counts. She doesn't know the source languages to deal with the source texts, and her knowledge and analysis of the secondary material isn't even on par with intermediary standards whereby she can somewhat critically assort through the information. Furthermore, even with those sporadic secondary material that she does utilize, her conclusions and interpretations of that material are often below the sub-standard and usually wrong. In other words, she is in no position to be writing intelligently about Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn. And why, for the love of God, does she keep spelling Abbas Amanat's name "Amanet"? This is even more irritating than Sen McGlinns "Moojen" for "Moojan." Let me now point out the most flawed idea in the book: twin manifestations. Briefly, there is no support for it in the Babi doctrine, or at least not in the manner Saffa is portraying it. The concept of "Twin Manifestations" as it is, is completely a bogus category of Baha'i manufacturing that is predicated on the notion that Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri Baha'u'llah (d. 1892) was indeed the Babi messiah as perceived by the Babi texts and that therefore the Babi theophany and the apparent Baha'i one are therefore contiguous – which they are not.

Clearly any study of the Babi *oeuvre*, specifically the *Persian Bayan*, will quickly disabuse any validity to that idea of twin manifestations, demonstrating that nothing could be further from the truth. Granted there is a sort of Babi pretext to the idea of twin manifestations, namely the spiritual unity of the last Letter of the Living, Mulla Muhammad 'Ali Barfurushi Quddus (d. 1849), with its founder the Bab (d. 1850). But if this notion was going to be explored with any sufficient depth or authenticity, the Babi lexicon of authority needed to be explored, especially the relationship and structure of the hierarchy of the Letters of the Living together with the hierarchy of All-Things stemming from it, which Ms

Saffa clearly has not. Mind you, this is not exactly an easy topic that just anyone can get their head around. It is heavily nuanced with the intellectual horizons of almost a dozen centuries of Islamicate gnosis and specifically a very sophisticated list of Shi'ite esoteric speculations. Clearly Saffa is in no position here to deal with these core issues, not to mention she harbours a visceral bias against anything remotely resembling the Islamic to even deign investigate them on any thorough level. But because that is the case, her whole argument then begins to fall to tatters. Attention to such detail in these things is paramount, and pre-eminently so. True, that at the Badasht conference of 1848 Tahirih made her own theopathic claims to divinity. But so did Quddus, as apparently had others. However I believe the fact has totally eluded Saffa that Babi theophanocracy was at this stage based on the underlying notion of a sort of '*ecclesia gnosticae divinitatis*' with the Primal Point -- being the Bab personally and not Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn -- always standing in for the godhead below while the Letters of the Living and the other Babi believers below them standing in for the godhead's names and attributes. Put another way, if the Bab was the One below here on earth, his immediate lieutenants were the One's emanations here below on earth. All of this by way of intellectual genealogy is referable to a complex Neoplatonic theophanology as found in the metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). If one were therefore to envision a series of concentric circles stretching into infinity, but with a single point at its centre, the Bab would be this point, with each of the Letters the various rungs of the circles all the way going out. Amanat has discussed this, albeit briefly. Maceoin's article "*Hierarchy, Authority and Eschatology in Early Babi Thought*" deals with it thoroughly, albeit with some misinterpretation. If one was to draw a further analogy, and from the Kabbalah, in order to understand the dynamics of this theophanocratic hierarchy better -- and specifically who is where, in what rank and why -- then the Bab would constitute the first sephirot Kether (the crown), Quddus the second sephirot Chokhmah (wisdom) and Tahirih only its third, Binah (knowledge), and so on and so forth. Why this idea has been so difficult to understand to not only Saffa, but others as well, is because there is a lack of attention (or outright ignorance) regarding the basic axioms of universal esotericism, especially as they have played themselves out in Islamicate. Had she even pondered upon one of the central maxims of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes - i.e. *as above, so below* - and how in the historical manifestation of its chiliastic dramaturgy this played out in the minds of the actors of early Babism (all solid Shi'ite esotericists), she would have immediately grasped what is going on and not left the matter in such an unnuanced, confused, chaotic, haphazard, simplistic and largely *ahistorical* state of disarray.

And this is precisely the problem with Saffa's visioning of Tahirih. She has transferred the simplistic presumptions of Baha'i theology into her *re-Imagined* Tahirih. I am amazed that one who raved endlessly to me about the Jungian concept of *enantiodromia* should then commit such a blatant *enantiodromic faux paus* as this! Therefore, the concept of twin manifestation that Saffa posits, making Tahirih equal to the Bab, is *tout court ahistorical*, undoctrinal, unsupportable by any text, including Tahirih's own, and thus harkens precisely to those assumptions that have no bearing on the authentic worldview of Babism. Talk about *enantiodromia*, the shadow recoiling on itself!

Furthermore, even if she wished to bring out the dichotomous *Shiva/Shakti* dynamic as a conceptual framework to read back the relationship of the Bab and Tahirih into; again, she would fail because the *Shiva/Shakti* dynamic is a complex principle referable to an even more complex doctrine of theophanies in Tantric metaphysics where *Shiva* stands always as the ultimate transcendent Source while *Shakti* remains the imminent divine Power. This is not an issue about equality but one of metaphysical complementarity. Unfortunately the generally flat-land ontologies of New Agers and the even more flat-land, politicized epistemologies stemming from it usually fail to grasp such important nuances. Which leads me to the point that New Age feminists or even their male counterparts who have not worked out, or sufficiently grasped, the *principia* of gnostic high metaphysics are usually not in any position to be talking intelligently about esotericism either. Saffa is a sore thumb example of this. She has not resolved for herself whether she wants to be a feminist or a gnostic. Note that this has nothing to do with sexism or feminism or whatever else either. This is an unfortunate fact borne out by the unresolved ambiguities, the ambivalences, which the personal temperaments of such people often demonstrate and which are, then, carried over into virtually all their intellectual discussions and perspectives. Gnosis by definition is beyond the temporal. It is of the vertical dimension and mind-bogglingly complex in its principles. It takes a certain spiritual type to actively engage in its universe. That is why both lock-jawed religionists and New Age fluff bunnies stay away from it. There are no gender politics in the domain of gnosis, which properly belongs to the horizontal, this-worldly sphere. I make no apologies for waxing Guenonian on this point. But facts are facts, however hard they might sound to some.

To explicate historically this point totally confused by Saffa, among other things during the Karbalah period (1844-7) Tahirih had claimed to be the Point of Knowledge (*nuqtat'ul-'ilm*), not the Primal Point (*nuqta al-ula*), which is reserved for the Bab and the Bab exclusively. That she had claimed and even been validated in this claim of pointship in knowledge in no way, shape or manner supports the thesis that she was then *ipso facto* to be considered the Bab's co-equal. Saffa has heard "point" and concluded "equality"

without grasping or distinguishing the fundamental difference between "primacy" and "knowledge" in the scheme of things. Clearly her Theology is garbled here, and badly. Admittedly, even Tahirih did not entertain as radical a notion such as this regarding the role Saffa attributes to her, as a perusal of her untranslated treatise "The Divine Effusions" (*ishraq-i-rabbani*) will immediately demonstrate. Indeed she was a senior Babi leader and Letter of the Living, deemed the return of Fatima no less, even divine. But she was not the chief central figure of Babism, let alone its partner co-Christ. She would be the first to flee and absolve herself from such an idea, as her laudatory poem to Subh-i-Azal (d. 1912), not to mention her ecstatic poems to the Bab lauding him as her absolute master, clearly shows without any reservation or equivocation. Even the Qurratiyyah Babis did not presume to go this far. As such Saffa has yet to comprehend the complex notion regarding the gradations of divinity in the Babi scheme of things that animates this discussion from first to last. That said, I believe I bear some responsibility for seeding this misguided idea into Saffa. Unfortunately I have concluded that Saffa never really listens carefully to what I say nor has she really understood what she did listen to, nor did she grasp the complexity of what I was alluding to when I lauded the divinity of Tahirih, as I still do and always will. Nor, moreover, do I believe she is a careful reader of those sources she has claimed to read which would have moved her away from the inanities she has so far articulated.

The next point I wish to draw attention to is the subtext animating the author personally, i.e. the unspoken yet transparent Derridean "presences" behind her text. Starr Saffa is a feminist and a New Ager. Note I do not begrudge her this on its own. Until her formal withdrawal in 2001 she was officially a longstanding member of the Baha'i faith for about thirty years. She was a Baha'i missionary (i.e. "pioneer") to the South Pacific for a number of those years. Clearly her formative worldviews have all been shaped by her activist Baha'i past and the sectarian presumptions animating it. She is also a white American woman who has had quite a turbulent, often bitter, experience with the sub-culture of Iranian Baha'is during most of that time. Let me first say this about that Iranian Baha'i sub-culture. In my considered opinion, the Iranian Baha'i sub-culture is largely unrepresentative of Iranian culture *tout court*, whether in Iran itself presently or among the non-Baha'i Iranian diaspora abroad. The Iranian Baha'i sub-culture very much inhabits a space all to its own and it engages in a love/hate relationship with the greater Iranian community, whether in Iran or abroad. The privileged elite amongst this sub-culture are another rung unto themselves

and very much a species of what the late Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969) distinguished as the "Westoxicated" (*gharbzadeh*). Most of these people are frozen in the past, exhibiting in every facet the marks and attributes of the Pahlavi era dictatorship. Therefore there is no way that the elite of this sub-culture can be associated or representative with the contemporary dynamics of Iranian social and cultural mores. Twenty-six years have elapsed since the Revolution. Much, much has changed in that time - and on every level. In many ways, as several others have also repeatedly pointed out, the present Iranian Baha'i sub-culture suffers the same cultural gaps and insularities which the European Jews suffered before the end of the Second World War and the formation of the state of Israel. There is no exaggeration here, and an impartial sociologist or cultural anthropologist would have a field day studying this group of people. But be that was it may, in my view based on my interactions with her over the years, Saffa has universalized her experience with the Iranian Baha'i sub-culture - as have many others as well within the matrix of Saffa's own specific sub-culture - and hence much of her re-*Imagining* of Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn is predicated on it. While wishing to portray Tahirih as the cultural maverick and social iconoclast that she was, the idiosyncratic hue this portrayal takes with Saffa is more akin to a '60s type bra-burning protest of a Gloria Steinem or Susan Faludi type. It seems to me that in the mind of Saffa the '60s feminist bra-burner and Tahirih unveiling is to be seen in a one to one relationship and thus *tout court* analogous. They are categorically not the same thing. Saffa's image of the paragon feminist and spiritualist (small "s") is thus coloured by these historical-specific paradigms of late 1960s American radicalism which are as separated from the experiences, assumptions and historical situation of a nineteenth century Iranian Muslim Shi'ite woman and Babi mystic as anything can possibly get. Their ideations regarding the universe and the very lifeworlds inhabited by the two are fundamentally different. Any good cultural anthropologist would know this truism instinctively. So, to then make such blanket associations, even implicitly, is a first order fallacy of reasoning and to indulge in it beyond the sensible, an outright atrocity to truth. Which leads me to the point that Saffa is largely (mis)appropriating Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn for her own ends to give voice to her own specific political agenda of alienation, whether from society at large or from the Iranian Baha'i sub-culture she has longstanding gripes against. Again, like her New Age feminism, I do not begrudge her alienation in and of itself. I also happen to share it. But that Tahirih has become her personal vehicle - the tool - to articulate this alienation, I find sad and unfortunate, but also predictable. Predictable because this has become one of many

established patterns in the continual (mis)appropriation of this figure, whether by the Baha'is or by the Iranian Left - and now, alas, Saffa herself.

Finally, it should also be noted that there is an almost twisted sort of *fetishized* representation of Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn - *a la* Edward Sa'id's argument in "Orientalism"- going on in Saffa. Tahirih is being '*represented*' and mediated through the specific cultural lens of late twentieth century Anglo-American historical-cultural perspectives. The use of the word "Christ" is one glaringly obvious example of this. Her persona is being read into the lexicon and hegemonic paradigms of Anglo-European Christianity which are in fact as far removed from Tahirih's own situation as anything can possibly get. Behind such assumptions is always lurking another mistaken fallacy, that she (Tahirih) cannot in fact represent herself so thus must be represented. Underneath this layer is the abiding ethnocentrism that looks upon non-Anglo-European cultures and societies with a mark of disdain and superiority. Such representations, fundamentally the hallmark of the mentality of cultural colonialism, then begins to take on a whole new life of its own whereby the originary premises are then finally forgotten altogether, or conveniently side-stepped. This mediation/representation then ends up becoming an end in itself, and one represented twisted or re-Imagined to fit the conclusions of the representing mediator. In my considered opinion, this is precisely what Starr Saffa has done to Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn, without possibly even realizing it herself.

In conclusion, other than Saffa's detailing of her own life experiences as a Baha'i and thereafter (i.e. her personal narrative), as a serious work **TAHIRIH THEALOGY: Female Cosmic Christ Spirit of the Age** - whether as a vanity publication or otherwise - has very little redeeming qualities to it *vis-à-vis* either as an example of scholarship regarding Tahirih or as esoteric meanderings on her life and career. Although my boldly asserting my views with such frankness will possibly seal matters, I do believe that I am responsible to the memory and legacy of Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn as both a living descendent as well as a longstanding devotee and practicing Babi. To reiterate the point, I am alarmed at the misappropriation that Tahirih Qurrat'ul-'Ayn continually suffers, and I am especially alarmed at this misappropriation being taken by those who otherwise do not exhibit much sensitivity to the Iranian cultural universe, its history, temperament and the matrix of its various religious universes. All my preceding comments, even when incendiary, have been made in absolute good faith by virtue of the above. I trust that Starr Saffa will also remain adult enough to take it all in her stride.

Wahid Azal

2005